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The opening of the harbour, the closing of the walls: urban history of two Mediterranean port cities

The convenience of a natural harbour, the needs of the maritime trade, the proximity of the sea and its resources had led the people of Malta and Messina – at different times – to construct two coastal cities, two port cities. But, as like all the Mediterranean port cities, the urban solutions are always ambiguous, always strained in the contradiction between opening and closing.

One of the problems characterizing the fortification of a coastal city originates from the port infrastructure that claims conflicting demands on the seclusion imposed from the Old Regime urban defence. Starting from the Medieval Age and, *a fortiori*, after the military revolution in the sixteenth century, the cities shut themselves to preserve their wealth and their social construction. The security of their freedom, their collective organization and the domain of the surrounding area pass through fortifications and walls. These are the defence against treacherous and dangerous strangers. But in the port cities urban life is animated by the harbour and this must necessarily be open to foreigners, thus making the city somewhat vulnerable. The dual dynamics, the dual intent, are recognized in maximum closing as opposed to the maximum opening.

Valletta and Messina live this contradiction: it is interesting to analyse the assumptions and design solutions in these two Mediterranean port cities in order to respond to their ambiguous identity.

The “forma urbis” of Messina in the 16th century is determined by the new circuit of walls, but there is not only a change in urban aspect, depicted in engravings and in plans reproducing it during the following three centuries. “The war, the siege, the military conflict, the assault of the walls are iconographic theme of great fortune, and following this visual repertoire we

have any kind of information that may relate to military strategy and to the shape of city and its defence”¹.

To strengthen the walls, “in the inner part of the port” of Messina, since the time of the Arabs, there was a fortress “which served not only to defend the city, but, being near the sea, was also the delightful residence of ancient princes”. It was the royal castle “equipped with three towers, overlooking the sea, and others on the other side”.

Count Roger d’Hauteville “built in the harbour two towers in ancient Royal Palace, which get the first place, and the first flag among the other Royal forts”². In 1563, being Viceroy D. Garzia de Toledo, a new reconstruction of the Royal Palace started “with great ideas and remarkable architecture”; the Viceroy Duke of Terranova completed the extension of the building and the Viceroy Filiberto Emmanuele of Savoy in 1623 embedded it with its “magnificent prospect” in the Maritime “Palazzata”³. The new mobile siege artillery, which appeared between 15th and 16th centuries, influenced the mineralization of Europe, making obsolete the huge walls built around the majority of cities. New walls appeared less tall but more elaborate, and were incorporated into assemblies of moats, ramparts, parapets and arcades. The artillery determines, especially in Italy, new fortified forms taking into account both the lines of defensive fire and the structural strength to the destructive power of firearms⁴. In short, the military engineers are trying to give an answer to what Machiavelli had observed: “the impetus of the artillery is such that even a very big wall in a few days falls”⁵. This fact made dangerous any attempt to continue to defend the city by relying on the simple resistance of the old walls. The range of new weapons proved

¹ C. De Seta, *Le mura simbolo della città*, in C. De Seta-J. Le Goff (eds.), *La città e le mura*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1989, p.19.

² Giuseppe Buonfiglio e Costanzo, *Messina Città Nobilissima*, de’ Franceschi, Venice 1606, p.3.

³ Finally, the earthquake of 1783 dealt a severe blow to “that superb building”, that semi ruined drag on its existence up to the middle of the 19th century: P. Arena-Primo, *Storia civile di Messina*, Dato, Palermo 1841, pp.209-211. “There is are almost sufficient documentary information relating to the foundation and the Norman ‘restoration’, the expansion of the castle during the Aragonese domination, and the reconfiguration of the sixteenth century, implemented according to the Tuscan architect Andrea Calamech”: D. Sutura, *L’iconografia del Palazzo Reale di Messina*, in “Lexicon”, n.1, 2005, p.47.

⁴ S. Pronti, *Produzione e diffusione delle armi nello Stato di Piacenza in età farnesiana: indicazioni per ricerche*, in A. Bilotto-P. Del Negro-C. Mozzarelli (a cura di), *I Farnese. Corti, guerra e nobiltà in antico regime*, Bulzoni, Rome 1997, p.492.

⁵ N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, Florence 1550, p.158.

impossible to defend by the top the walls. The problem was solved by the invention of the ramparts; the bastion allowed the defenders to keep each section of the walls from side positions and thus to strike the enemy's flank and also to combat under cover⁶. New fortifications, and artillery that had favoured their birth, began to consume an increasing share of the wealth of the city.

The turning point occurred in Messina after the passage of Charles 5th in 1535: born in this period of major historical importance, from military and town planning standpoint, the new circuit of the walls marks the city boundaries for three centuries.

The Senate of Messina in June 1537 decided to build new walls and fortifications, due to the development of the art of war, calling for supervision of works Antonio Ferramolino from Bergamo, engineer of the Royal Court, and Domenico Giuntalocchi from Prato, assisted by the mathematician Francesco Maurolico and the sculptor Giovan Angelo Montorsoli⁷. The decision of the municipal government is combined with the will of Don Ferrante Gonzaga, Viceroy of Sicily, to enlarge the circuit of the fortified city with new walls.

The possibility of an imminent attack of the Ottoman fleet was real and the city government considered inadequate apparatus and instruments held to counter the threat and put up a concrete counter-attack. Any reflection on the Sicilian defence, therefore, considers the need to prevent access to ports in Messina, Syracuse, Augusta, Trapani, Milazzo and to a lesser extent, Marsala: these are the sites on which the attention is focused because of their ability to accommodate an enemy fleet⁸.

So the government of the Viceroy and the Messina Senate decided to allocate large sums for the renovation or for new construction of forts, castles, fortified walls.

⁶ G. Simoncini, *Città e società nel Rinascimento*, volume 1, Einaudi, Turin 1974, p.149.

⁷ "It is still necessary to investigate, for example, except for some interventions in the works of fortifications of Messina and Palermo, the Sicilian activity of Domenico Giunti": M.S. Di Fede, *La gestione dell'architettura civile e militare a Palermo tra XVI e XVII secolo: gli ingegneri del regno*, in "Espacio, Tiempo y Forma", Serie VII, H. del Arte, t. 11, 1998, p.136.

⁸ L. Dufour, *Città e fortificazioni nella Sicilia del Cinquecento*, in C. De Seta-J. Le Goff (eds.), *La città*, cit., p.108.

The new walls circuit of Messina not only marks the distinction between the inside and the outside, but is also a display of power in concrete and symbolic terms.

This remarkable defence is the main example of the evolution toward the Renaissance military architecture of the city, or rather the transition from an old design to a new one.

There is also a strengthening of the sense of security of citizens, who feel more protected from external attacks and especially from the threat of assault by the Turks.

Messina citizens then develop a sense of greater municipal autonomy, which increases their self confidence and brings them to the challenge against Spain in 1674.

The year 1537 marks a turning point from the previous period. The new fence was erected by the Viceroy Don Ferrante Gonzaga in the “modern way” by broadening the existing old fortification. From the old northern walls of the harbour, where was the fort of San Giorgio a Molovecchio (Old Dock), a new section of walls was extended until the Fort St. James, afterwards called Porta Reale (King’s Gate), named for the entry of Don John of Austria, after the battle of Lepanto in 1571.

The circuit of city walls, with its thirteen ramparts, starts from the sea-shore, going up from Fort St. James to the other said St. Vincent, in which there was a small gate for the convenience of the inhabitants of the Village of St. Leon. From there the circuit joins up the high fort Andria, which is above the city in its north-western corner.

From the heights of the fort Andria a long curtain surrounds the city in the western side down to Bocchetta Gate, where it is the bastion of St. Stephen. From there the walls are constructed for the outer fortification of the fortress Guelfonia.

Guelfonia Castle was a military stronghold inside the walls, the most important fortress in Medieval Age, ancient and absolutely strategic. This castle lost much of its value as early as the sixteenth century, becoming *de facto* a position, or fortification used for the fighters after a first defence.

Thence along the same line, and passing through the ancient Victory Tower, and the mountain of Caparrina, afterwards called Montalto, the walls descend to the Contrada de’ Gentilmeni. Down the circuit meets southward

the Luscinee torrent with the Gate of Portalegni, so called for the “jus legnandi” (the right to cut wood) that formerly the Archbishop had on that territory. Two small bastions defend the gate⁹. From here, going up the high hill of Tirone, the walls surround the Jesuits Novitiate, and forming an angle, go down to the southern side of the city and join the bulwark of the Holy Spirit, and the Segreto.

It follows an extended curtain, in which there are two gates, the Imperial and the Eustachia, backed by the bastion of St. Bartholomew. From here the curtain descends almost straight line, and form the forts Mezzomondello, St. Clare, and D. Blasco, “propugnaculum contra Mauros”, whose angle is washed by the sea waves.

Here the circuit ends having the new walls extended on three sides of the city for five miles¹⁰. In the same side of the curtain there is Porta Nuova (New Gate). Porta Nuova, or Maddalena Gate, is one of the gates opened in Messina walls on the southern side; outside the walls there is running the great “fiumara” Zaera.

From Don Blasco Fort, another side of walls faced the South-West to the Fort St. George, demolished in 1680 for the construction of the Citadel.

But above everything else it is important the castle, which took the name of Gonzaga, its founder. Erected on a lofty granitic mountain, it dominates “from that eminence” the city and the harbour and south beach¹¹.

The port, to which Messina is wholly indebted for her prosperity, and even existence, is formed by a lengthened curved tongue of land. The entrance on the North is defended on the West, or main-land side, by the bastion of Porta Reale, and at the extremity of the curved promontory by a new fortification.

After 1537 it was erected there the Salvatore fort with a new devising plan, which incorporates the old medieval buildings of the tower of St. Ann and the Basilian monastery of St. Savior¹². The fortress of the Saviour at

⁹ C.D. Gallo, *Annali della Città di Messina, Capitale del Regno di Sicilia*, first volume, Gaipa, Messina 1756, p.91.

¹⁰ G. Grosso Cacopardo, *Opere*, first volume, *Scritti minori (1832-1857)*, G. Molonia ed., Società messinese di storia patria, Messina 1994, p.333.

¹¹ G. Grosso Cacopardo, *Opere*, cit., pp.333-334.

¹² N. Zeldes, *Incident in Messina: Letters of Ferdinand the Catholic concerning Portuguese conversos caught on their way to Constantinople*, in “Sefarad”, 62 (2002), p.415 (<http://sefarad.revistas.csic.es>).

Messina is similar, in its function of controlling access to the port, to the Colombaia Tower for example, at the entrance of the port of Trapani, the castle Maniace at the mouth of the harbor of Syracuse, the Castellammare near the Cala di Palermo and Milazzo Castle, overlooking the harbour city¹³.

From then on the control of the mouth of the harbour of Messina, “the little arm of the sea which forms the entrance of the port”¹⁴, was full. There was an immaterial gate open to exchanges with the rest of the world. The widest mouth of Messina, beyond the gates open to the mainland, was that of the port, closed at night with a long chain taut between Fort St. Salvatore and Fort Real Basso, but prompt to be opened, especially for the ships laden with the first aliment, wheat. Through the great mouth of the port, at the beginning of the 18th century, it enters an interesting flow of biomass with a high calorific capacity: the sugar¹⁵.

But beyond these vital flows, through the mouth of the harbour can enter dangerous microbial flows. So, in particular, a port building - that of the maritime health, the lazaretto - incorporates an ambiguous condition. It welcomes foreign vessels - potential carriers of epidemic attacks from outside, even more dangerous than the military ones - and at the same time it monitors, observes, confines, and then defends the city.

It is possible to recognize in the harbour lighthouse, the Lanterna, similar ambivalent characteristics to those which would be in the lazaretto. The city intends to invest in its greatest activity, the maritime trade. The port city of Messina would build a new tower on St. Raineri promontory; it is precisely that desire that leads to the decision in 1553 to build a new tower in the far eastern edge of the city. The next significant iconology of this tower is unmistakable landmark not only for St. Raineri peninsula, but to represent the entire city. The Lantern Tower is designed in a midpoint between the fort of St. Saviour and the rampart of St. George, which had recently been built a mile south-east on the beach. The work planned by Montorsoli arises under the sign of duplicity: it announces an invitation to the refuge harbour and

¹³ L. Dufour, *Città e fortificazioni*, cit., p.118.

¹⁴ A.L. Castellan, *Letters on Italy*, London 1820, p.32.

¹⁵ L. Iaria, *La Fata Morgana: politica asburgica e porto franco*, in *Scritti di storia per Gaetano Cingari*, Giuffrè, Milan 2001, pp.370-371.

simultaneously searches the Strait of Messina to communicate the potential risk¹⁶.

Ports have been, for a long time, focal points of local, regional, national and international economic development and social change. The projection to the hinterland, and, at the same time, to an extended *vorland*, as Amélia Polónia argues, led seaports history to become a significant field of research to support the study of evolving trade networks, as well as technological and industrial development and social and urban changes. So, seaports are no longer studied exclusively as ‘infrastructures or economic centres’, but as a really complex system, resulting from economic, political, social and cultural forces; the gateways between land and sea, between the hinterland and the so called *vorland*, a nodal axis with repercussions on the territorial, economic, social and mental structures¹⁷.

The role played by Euro-Mediterranean seaports in the Early Modern period seems undeniable. Among the Mediterranean countries, the Maltese archipelago played a great role. The Maltese islands were close to the major maritime routes throughout history and they were often on the border between clashing military, political, religious, and cultural entities. For these reasons, the islands were presumed to have been strategically and economically important, and, thus, frequented by ships.

The Maltese archipelago is so situated in the narrows between Europe to the north and Africa to the south so as to be the key position is further enhanced by the two excellent harbours found on the east coast, Marsamxett and the Grand Harbour, the latter amongst the finest natural harbours on the globe¹⁸. The Grand Harbour - *il-Port il-Kbir* - in Malta is essentially a natural harbour which is probably the island's greatest geographic asset, and a

¹⁶ N. Aricò, *La torre della Lanterna di Giovannangelo Montorsoli*, Gbm, Messina 2005, pp.29-32.

¹⁷ A. Polónia, *European seaports in the Early Modern Age: concepts, methodology and models of analysis*, in “Cahiers de la Méditerranée” [En ligne], 80|2010: <http://cdlm.revues.org/index5364.html>.

¹⁸ R. Ghirlando, S. Mercieca, M. Renault (eds.), *La navigation du savoir. Étude de sept arsenaux historiques de la Méditerranée*, Malta University Publishers, Malta 2006.

cardinal determinant of Malta's history¹⁹. This is reflected in its commercial activity and its military architecture²⁰.

The analysis of the change of the relation between Maltese people and the sea is fundamental to understand their projection towards the external world.

In the winter of 1522 Europe watched the Rhodian fortifications quake and shake slowly towards destruction by the Ottomans²¹. On December 24th, following six months of fighting, the Turks took possession of the island of Rhodes. After the loss of this land, the Knights of the Order of St. John were left without a home. The expulsion of the Order of Saint John from its base in Rhodes and its arrival in Malta was a turning point in history both for the Knights and the island.

Malta was a safe distance from Europe but close to the Barbary Coast. Charles V also introduced a new set of rules to keep the Knights under very strict control²².

Unlike their unchecked freedom in Rhodes, in Malta the Knights were not only vassals of the King of Spain, but they were forced to renew their homage via the King of Sicily every year²³.

¹⁹ For a complete framework related to the history of the Maltese harbours since Antiquity see: T. Gambin, *Ports and port structures for Ancient Malta*, in R. Turchetti-L. de Maria (eds.), *Le strutture dei porti e degli approdi antichi*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2004, pp. 159-174; Id., *Malta and the Mediterranean shipping lanes in the Middle Ages*, in R. Turchetti-L. de Maria (eds.), *Rotte e porti del Mediterraneo dopo la caduta dell'Impero romano d'Occidente*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2004, pp. 115-134.

²⁰ See. F. Borchardt-N. Jaspert-H. J. Nicholson (eds.), *The Hospitallers, the Mediterranean and Europe*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2007.

²¹ V. Mallia-Milanes, *Charles V's Donation to the Order of St. John*, in "Peregrinationes", vol. II, 2001 online: www.orderofmalta.int/.../Charlesv_donation.pdf. The Order had transformed Rhodes into one enormous fortress. Stout walls and huge citadels were built to keep watch over the coasts.

²² The conditions attached to the donation were harsher than expected. To Malta and Gozo, Charles V now added the North African city and fortress of Tripoli which had been in Spanish hands since 1510.

²³ "Many difficulties however occurred, before the acceptance of this offer was finally determined on. Charles had coupled with the gift, several conditions that could not be entertained, and the intervention of the Pope for the mitigation could not, for some time, be made available, as he was then at war with the Emperor. Peace however having at length been declared, the Pope, who had himself been in former days a Knight of St. John, and had abandoned the Order, to pursue that ecclesiastical career, which raised him to the Papal chair, under the title of Clement VII, exerted his influence to obtain for his protégés

The Hospitallers had had an investigation made into the state of the island, which did not impress them very well. The first commission sent by the Grandmaster in 1524 to report on Malta's potential as a base concluded that Malta had three fundamental disadvantages: food had to be imported, the existing fortifications were old and in need of repair, and the local population was not large enough to provide an adequate defense force. Malta was described as lacking in trees, very hot and short of drinking water in summer with stony fields and suffering attacks from pirates and corsairs. The only town of any size was Mdina (literally, in Arabic, 'the City-fortress'), a walled city on high ground in the centre of the island which dated back to Roman times. Around this was Rabat, 'the suburb'. The Maltese government of the island was based at Mdina (also known as the *Città Notabile*): the government was known as the *Università*. If before 1530 the islands' political and administrative centre was necessarily located in or around inland Mdina, by way of contrast, the Hospitallers exploited Malta's spacious Grand Harbour. In fact, according to the commissioners the only positive element was the condition of the coast: two very large and deep inlets could host numerous ships of notable tonnage and size. The two ports could be used immediately to offer more than adequate refuge for the fleet, allowing also to manoeuvre with ease. The problem regarding the installation of the war fleet was a decisive factor especially if we consider that the defence of the island was initially to be entrusted to the fleet in case of attack.

With the coming of the Order of St. John, Birgu was chosen to be their city. So it was greatly improved and restored the Knights' requirements, *Auberges* for the various languages of the Order, a hospital, new law courts and other palaces sprung everywhere²⁴.

One of the most urgent tasks to be undertaken by the Order upon its arrival in Malta was to reinforce the fortifications. The inadequacy of the defences became apparent after the Ottoman siege of 1565. "The Ottoman

a mitigation of the terms, which shackled the proffer made by the Emperor": W. Porter, *A History of the Fortress of Malta*, P. Cumbo, Malta 1858, pp. 42-43.

²⁴ "The coming of the Knights and their choice of Vittoriosa [Birgu] rather than Mdina as their centre of government greatly stimulated the life of what had previously been a small fishing port. Piracy had been a major source of income for the Knights since their days in Rhodes, but they also encouraged Maltese captains to apply for privateering licenses; they were allowed to fly the flag of the Order (a white cross on a red field), and had to pay 10 per cent of their profits to the Grand Master": D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean*; Penguin, London 2011, p. 435.

choice of targets depended upon a number of relatively inflexible physical restrictions imposed by the inherent limitations of galley fleets”²⁵.

The Christian states competed among themselves to secure information; they routinely circulated dispatches that served their particular political and military interests: thus the Knights of Malta frequently exaggerated the threat from the Levant in order to secure men and provisions from Sicily.

After the Great Siege, the urgent need to rebuild Fort St. Elmo, and to construct an impregnable fortified city heralded a new phase in the island’s defences. These new works were undertaken at a stage when the debate on fortress design was focusing on ever more specific problems²⁶.

Grandmaster Jean Parisot de la Valette built Valletta after the Great Siege of 1565. He realized the Knights needed a new city with strong defences in case the Turks returned. The architects of Valletta were Francisco Laparelli, a pupil of Michelangelo, and Girolamo Cassar. Francisco Laparelli chose the Sciberras peninsula as the site of the Knights’ new city. The Sciberras peninsula, with its elevation above the harbour and its narrow connection to the mainland, provided natural defences. To further enhance these defences, the architects planned a series of walls and ditches. France, Spain, Portugal, and the Papacy donated large amounts of money to the Knights to construct Valletta²⁷.

Construction began on March 28, 1566. Although La Valette started the construction, he died in 1568 and did not live to see the completion of the city named in his honour.

According to Alison Hoppen, “only with the building of Valletta in the years after 1566 did the knights finally commit themselves to Malta as a permanent base”²⁸.

²⁵ J. F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys. Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1974, p. 177.

²⁶ These temporary constructions and the evolution of the Great Siege battles are described in deep detail by Francesco Balbi da Corregio in his memoirs *La verdadera relación de todo que el anno de MDLXV ha sucedido en la Isla de Malta*, printed in Barcelona in 1568.

²⁷ A. Hoppen, *Military Priorities and Social Realities in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Malta and its Fortifications*, in V. Mallia-Milanes, *Hospitaller Malta, 1530-1798*, Mireva Publications, Malta, 1993, pp. 399-428.

²⁸ A. Hoppen, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John, 1530-1798*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1979, p. 23.

The expansion and fortification of Valletta, named for la Valette, was begun in 1566, soon becoming the home port of one of the Mediterranean's most powerful navies. The island's hospitals were expanded as well. The main Hospital could accommodate 500 patients and was renown as one of the finest in the world. At the vanguard of medicine, the Hospital of Malta boasted Schools of Anatomy, Surgery and Pharmacy.

To protect their headquarters the Hospitallers undertook an extensive programme of fortification. The building of the new capital and the reinforcement of the existing fortifications belonged to this programme. For a military organization like that of the Hospitaller Knights, which sought to affirm its destiny in stone, the design and the construction of fortifications assumed great importance. Nowhere was this commitment to build fortresses so actively pursued as during the Maltese period of the Order's long military history. In the 268 years of Hospitaller occupation, the Knights transformed the Maltese islands from a barren outpost into a front line bulwark of Christendom, literally an island-fortress in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea²⁹.

A great number of towers were also built around Malta and Gozo which served as watch towers. One example is the tall, rocky outcrop crowned by Lippia Tower (also known as Ta' Lippia or Gnejna Watch Tower), which dominates Gnejna bay, built in 1637 upon orders by Grand Master Juan de Lascaris-Castellar. Lippia Tower formed part of the intricate coastal defence network constructed by the Knights.

The control exerted by the Order and the Catholic authorities was not only addressed to the so called 'Infidels'. In Early Modern Malta, the society of the Grand Harbour was under the control of the Roman Inquisition. Its aim was to inculcate a sense of correct behaviour and the correct beliefs expected from a Catholic. The tribunal of Inquisition in Malta had among its main tasks those of punishing renegades and heretic people, witches, and looking after Muslims and Jews slaves³⁰.

²⁹ S.C. Spiteri, *The Art of Fortress Building in Hospitaller Malta: A Study of Building Methods, Materials and Techniques*, Book Distributors, Malta 2008.

³⁰ The Inquisition in Malta forms part of the Roman Inquisition tribunal that started to function as a separate tribunal from the Bishop's law courts in 1562. It was due to the advent of Mgr. Pietro Dusina, that the Roman Inquisition tribunal became distinctly cut off from the Bishop's jurisdiction.

Because of the strategic geographic position of the island, the maritime activities³¹ of the rulers and of the islanders, a great number of ‘various’ people (often belonging to different religions) got Malta. The dangers coming from the external world so were not linked only to Barbary corsairs attacks, or in the name of the Ottomans, but they could derive from the new ideas circulating in the western world such as Lutheranism and heresy. It was necessary as strict control of the most ‘contaminated’ place where could arrive the new ‘enemies’: the Grand Harbour.

The Birgu area was undoubtedly most exposed to heresy, and soon proved to be contagious, infecting the educated sectors of society. Because of his residence in the same port, in the small city of Vittoriosa, the Inquisitor had once settled there a very close monitoring of the port environment, which consisted of a strict control of entry and exit of vessels. This monitoring was recommended by the Holy Office itself, which, from Rome, maintained close relations with all its Inquisitors offices, and particularly with that of Malta: on 5th September 1609, the Holy Office recalled in particular that the Inquisitor of Malta had absolutely to monitor entry and exit of foreigners in the cities of Port, and send regular reports to Rome³². The port control was performed by the religious and lay staff, the service of the Inquisitor, which was responsible for monitoring the vessels, to attend the registration of customs entries, apprehend suspects and witnesses to gather prior to trials. Inquisitorial control was exercised against non-Catholic Christians (Protestants and Orthodox, or Eastern Christians) and all non-Christians (Jewish and Muslim slave or free, and especially the renegades)³³. It took place at the same time as the Grand Harbour custom: commercial vessels should for example be essential to the port authorities and gain a clear picture of the cargo, catches and persons on board. In the case of ships

³¹ M. Aymard, *Chiourmes et galères dans la Méditerranée du XVI^e siècle*, in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel*, vol. I, Toulouse, 1973, pp. 49-64; G. Lopez Nadal (ed.), *El comerç alternatiu. Corsarisme i contraban (ss. XV-XVIII)*, VIII Jornades d'Estudis Històrics Locals, Institut d'Estudis Baleàrics, Palma de Mallorca 1989.

³² C. Cassar, *Witchcraft, sorcery, and the Inquisition: a study of cultural values in Early Modern Malta*, Mireva Publications, Malta 1996; A. Bonnici, *Medieval and Roman Inquisition in Malta*, RUH, Malta 1998.

³³ Questions of religious identity arose concerning Maltese sailors who had been captured by Muslims and who may have converted to Islam. The local parishes encouraged the Maltese people to denounce blasphemers, sorcerers, and heretics to the tribunal. These denunciations reflect village conflicts and tensions. These circumstances also suggest that the greatest challenge facing the foreign-born Inquisitors was not eradicating heresy but understanding the language of the islanders.

leaving and returning to Malta, the Customs officers compare the list of arrival and departure to that record all newcomers, both embedded during stops. The *familiares* and commissioners of the Holy Office could attend the registration and take note of the suspects, but in most cases, the custom officers are responsible to denounce to the *familiares* the non-Catholics or the renegades.

A stricter control was reserved to ships and galleys coming back with a remarkable number of booties and Muslim captives. When the slaves entered the port and appeared before the Customs officers, were normally already counted by the writer of the galley, and recorded in the register. But it was on arrival in the port, when all hope of escape seemed lost, that are most often discovered the renegades. In the case the renegades did not admit their apostasy, they were often denounced by crew members, who had suspected them during the trip. This immediate control, practiced upon the arrival of any ship in the port of Malta, was a permanent religious supervision, sought by the Inquisition that regularly called the inhabitants of the island to an anonymous denunciation³⁴.

A new and important phase of fortifications in Malta began in 1669, partially in response to the Ottoman occupation of Candia. A decision was made to reinforce the Floriana Line with what essays of the period claimed to be the most effective external work, the crowned hornwork. Fear of a possible Ottoman siege moved the Knights to construct a new line of defense (the Cottonera Line) on the other side of the harbour, opposite to La Valletta; this design circumscribed the hills of Sta Margherita and San Salvatore, and the half finished Margherita Line³⁵.

We cannot analyse the history of this Mediterranean archipelago without considering the importance of its evolution from a strategical and technological point of view. The arrival of the Order on the island changed the perspective of the maritime and military policies.

According to the military historian John A. Lynn, in Malta warfare is understood also as a cultural expression. It means that the motivation for war and the way it is conducted - taking into account not just the code of conduct of warriors but also the choice of technology employed and other

³⁴ A. Brogini, *L'Inquisition, élément de l'identité maltaise (xvi^e-xvii^e siècles)*, in «Cahiers de la Méditerranée» [En ligne], 66|2003: <http://cdlm.revues.org/index96.html>.

³⁵ Q. Hughes, *Fortress: Architecture and Military History in Malta*, Lund Humphries, London 1969.

material and strategic considerations - must be understood as belonging to a cultural context of the times and whether there was a correlation between cultural change and the Order's discursive change on warfare (if such a change actually occurred)³⁶. Michel Fontenay writes, quoting Louis XIV's minister, Colbert, "the knights on the galleys in reality act as soldiers". Fontenay argues that it was a well known fact that maritime matters were left in the hands of the mariners, mostly Maltese, and that they were the real men with talent on board³⁷.

Another element which contributed to the building of the Order identity, and above all of the Maltese archipelago identity, was the introduction of a new health policy, which played a sort of game of chess opening and closing the harbours and controlling the arrivals and the departures to and from these islands³⁸.

The establishment of Manoel island as a temporary quarantine hospital – or *Lazzaretto* – took place during the plague epidemic of 1593. The little island in the middle of Marsamxett harbour was an ideal place for the segregation of contaminated cargo, passengers and crews, and its proximity to the Grand Harbour rendered its control feasible. Grandmaster Lascaris erected a permanent *Lazzaretto* on the same site in 1643, which later was enlarged. The main function of the *Lazzaretto* was to segregate incoming passengers as well as imports from areas where the plague was considered endemic, or from ports that were known to be currently infected.

By the end of the seventeenth century, reports of military engineers presented to the 'Consiglio di Guerra' pointed out that the *Isolotto* could represent a threat to the security of Valletta. Several proposals were made to fortify the *Isolotto*, and the urgent need for such a Fort was further highlighted by military engineer Charles-François de Mondion in 1715. The decision to fortify the *Isolotto* was finally made in

1723 and a ceremony was organized on the 14th September, of the same year. During this period, Grandmaster Manoel De Vilhena sponsored the construction of a fort on the islet, later called Fort Manoel after the Grand

³⁶ J. A. Lynn, *Battle. A History of Combat and Culture*, Westview Press, Oxford 2003, p. xvi.

²¹ M. Fontenay, *Corsaires de la foi ou rentiers du sol? Les Chevaliers de Malte dans le «corso» méditerranéen au XVII siècle*, in "Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine", XXXV, 3, (1988), p. 372.

³⁸ G. Restifo, *I porti della peste. Epidemie mediterranee fra Sette e Ottocento*, Mesogea, Messina 2005.

Master who built it and thereafter the whole island was called Manoel Island. The Fort was designed to prevent an enemy from taking the high ground at the tip of the island and firing out Valletta.

The new *Lazzaretto* on Manoel Island was planned in accordance with the best concepts of quarantine measures prevailing at the time. It occupied the block of buildings now called “Old Palace” and provided accommodation for groups of passengers or families undergoing different periods of observation and isolation.

There were ample stores and warehouses for merchandise originating from infected ports. There were facilities for disinfection, for fumigation for spiritual comfort, the Grand Master having erected a chapel on the opposite side of the harbour³⁹.

The quarantine regulations issued by the Council of the Order were very comprehensive and strict; they were incorporated in the Statute Book of the Order and were enforced by an authority called the Commissioners of Health.

The Commissioners of Health had ample means to enforce their authority.

They had under their command patrol boats carrying gun crews and fully armed soldiers to police the harbour. The staff under the Commissioners of Health consisted of Guardians of Health some of whom did duty afloat; others were employed at the *Lazzaretto*. In addition to the Guardians of Health, there were the crews of the patrol boats and of the watch boats; the latter kept a constant watch on ships held in quarantine. On the 23rd December 1782, Grand Master De Rohan appointed a Commission to revise the laws of Malta, and a code of laws for municipal affairs was published in 1784. The new Code empowered judges to inflict severe penalties not only for the perpetration of, but also for any attempt to commit, quarantine offences, in conformity with the principle: “*Sola facti veritate inspecta more militari*”⁴⁰.

³⁹ That chapel dedicated to St. Roque, the Protector against plague, was built on top of the bastion; its front was wide open so that the inmates of the *Lazzaretto* across the harbour could follow divine service. For further details see: A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica della Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta, 1866.

⁴⁰ *Del Diritto Municipale di Malta*, Malta 1784, as quoted in J. Galea, *The Quarantine Service and the Lazzaretto of Malta*, in “*Melita Historica*”, 4 (1966) 3, pp. 184-209.

It is undeniable the history of Valletta and Messina from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries present evident similarities: the building of fortifications, the walls reinforcement, the corsairs attacks, the quarantine stations, the adopted sanitary policies. In conclusion, comparing the evolution of these two Mediterranean seaports, it is possible to affirm both Messina and Valletta (with the whole harbour area involving the Three Cities) shared a common destiny: an ambiguous identity. Two cosmopolitan realities where goods, people, ideas circulated, but in the port cities urban life is animated by the port and this must necessarily be open to foreigners, thus making the city somewhat vulnerable. Messina and the Maltese capital city lived this contradiction.